

# observant

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Next week, no printed edition of *Observant* will be published. Keep following us online for the latest news at [www.observantonline.nl/english](http://www.observantonline.nl/english)



## editorial

## Made-up stuff

Last week I asked Google, “Why did bishop Gijsen step down?” (read the article about chaplaincy troubles). I knew it had something to do with sexual misconduct, but I couldn’t remember exactly what had happened. In the AI overview at the top of my screen, terms like “ongoing conflict” and “affairs” popped up. Rather vague, so I clicked on the references to the *AD*, *Trouw*, *NRC*, *Wikipedia*. Half an hour later, it turned out to be a lot more complex than I had thought. The wonderful (and time-consuming) thing about journalistic detective work is that you can follow a trail of articles and so learn more about the facts of the matter, facts based on reliable sources.

There was rather a to-do about the use of AI in journalism last week. Peter Vandermeersch, former editor-in-chief at *NRC*, had made a mistake. As a ‘fellow’ of Belgian media company Mediahuis, Vandermeersch had blogged about topics in journalism, such as AI. He knew all about the risks, that AI sometimes just makes up stuff. And now he had copied some of that made-up stuff (quotes) onto his blog. He admitted he had “underestimated the power of AI hallucinations”. We don’t have any strict rules at the *Observant* office yet, because we only occasionally use ChatGPT or Copilot. Nevertheless, we are always on our guard. It is a language model that predicts words, not a database of facts. Not to mention that ChatGPT has come under fire after OpenAI announced it had made a deal with the American government. People are worried that AI models might be used in military operations, among other things. That gave us pause for thought at the office, too.

What do we use AI for at *Observant*? We occasionally use it to translate a few sentences into English (all our articles are sent to real, human translators), or for a spark of creativity for an article’s headline. Before concluding that they’re all horrible clichés. I recently had ChatGPT run a summary analysis on an impenetrable memorandum, just to see if it could make anything of it (answer: no).

Although here we have to hold our hands up and admit, we’re amateurs, not trained in inputting the right prompts (or questions), and that plays a large part in determining what AI produces. Would we call ChatGPT a ‘writing assistant’? Absolutely not. For now, we’re happy to rely on each other’s brains and creativity.

Wendy Degens

*The editor-in-chief gives a look behind the scenes at the editorial office*



## series the times they are (not) a changin’

# Chaplaincy troubles



Visiting the catholic student association Servatius in 1986, with pastor Peró on the left Photo: Paul Mellaart

## 1975–present

“Think of my work as that of a GP. You’re not always needed, but it’s good that you’re there”, said the departing student chaplain, Jesuit Father Frits van der Ven, to *Observant* in 1981. Bishop Gijsen of the Diocese of Roermond did not share that sentiment. He couldn’t stomach the fact that Van der Ven celebrated the Eucharist with a Protestant minister at the student chaplaincy. The man was dismissed from Tafelstraat 13, home of the ecumenical chaplaincy. A later Catholic student chaplain was dismissed for being openly gay, which Gijsen found intolerable. But this person refused to step down, according to the *Observant* archives, so the diocese decided to establish and fund its own chaplaincy: In de Fortuyn, located right next to St. Matthias Church on Boschstraat. Fernando Peró led it for many years, surrounding himself with students from the Catholic student association Servatius. *Observant* paid them a visit in 1993, shortly after Gijsen suddenly resigned for health reasons – though he was later implicated in sexual abuse.

During the visit, the journalist asked Peró and Servatius about Gijsen’s resignation and their views on euthanasia, cohabitation and abortion, as well as Peró’s membership of Opus Dei, a deeply conservative Catholic organisation often likened to a cult. “I am an Opus Dei priest”, Peró acknowledged, “but my job is student chaplain, and that’s what I am 24 hours a day. As such, I answer only to the bishop and no one else.” What did he think of the other Catholic student chaplain, at Tafelstraat 13? Peró acted as if he didn’t understand the question, insisting that he was the only Catholic student chaplain: “I am the only one officially appointed by the diocese.” The article did not go down well with members of Servatius, who accused the journalist of biased and “sensationalised” reporting.

The Catholic student association Servatius was dissolved in the late 1990s. Membership was low, and the rent was high. Everard de Jong, who was later appointed auxiliary bishop in 1998, had tried to

succeed Peró, but without success. In an interview, he said he regretted not taking a more “thorough” approach to the student chaplaincy. “At first, I thought I’d visit student houses – just knock on doors and say, ‘I’m the student chaplain, may I introduce myself?’ Servatius advised against it, thinking it was too pushy. Now I wonder: why didn’t I do it?” Around that same time, the Catholic chaplain at Tafelstraat 13 resigned. Perhaps it was time for a single, joint candidate? De Jong didn’t think so. Tafelstraat, he said, had “its own opinion”, while “the bishops ultimately [decide] what is Catholic. There’s

**“You can’t have two chaplains both calling themselves Catholic. It would be incomprehensible and unacceptable to the public”**

a kind of copyright, a kind of brand, and it’s up to the bishops and the pope. And you can’t have two chaplains both calling themselves Catholic. It would be incomprehensible and unacceptable to the public.” De Jong’s assessment proved accurate: two new chaplains were appointed, one at Tafelstraat 13 and one at the Basilica of Our Lady. Although Tafelstraat continued to attract students for activities like praying, singing, drawing, cooking and meditating, finances were tight. For years, the university funded the building, but not the student chaplains’ salaries. In 1978, when Frits van der Ven was officially proposed, the State University of Limburg refused to pay for a chaplain, as it wasn’t a Roman Catholic university. The same applied to the other chaplains. Budget cuts eventually forced Tafelstraat 13 to close; the student chaplaincy moved to Capucijnestraat 122 and was renamed InnBetween. It has since temporarily moved to the Kaleido building on Tapijn.

Wendy Degens

*Maastricht University was founded fifty years ago. In this anniversary series, we delve into our own archives to rediscover memorable, funny, relevant and curious news stories from the past*

New lecture room will cause energy shortfall

# Duboisdomein 30 to get massive solar façade

*Instead of installing solar panels on the roof, Maastricht University is incorporating them into the façade of Duboisdomein 30 to address the building's energy shortfall.*

Much of the building is occupied by the Faculty of Science and Engineering, which has grown significantly in recent years. Various laboratories and teaching spaces have been added, along with *ETpathinder* – a miniature version of the Einstein Telescope. Work has also recently begun on a new lecture room that will accommodate around 250 students. “At peak times, we already use more electricity than our contract with the grid operator Enexis allows”, says Ivo Maessen, programme manager for sustainable real estate at UM. “They aren't happy about it, but there's just no other way.” The new lecture room will only add to the problem: “At full occupancy, there will be almost twice as many people in the building as there are now. They and their devices will generate a lot of heat. This means much more energy is needed for cooling, especially in summer.” While several university buildings are already “pushing the limits” in terms of energy consumption, the situation is most urgent at DUB30.

The solution, says Maessen, is to generate energy on-site through solar panels. But it isn't as easy as simply placing them on the roof: “We also need space for other installations, and the roof won't be able to support the weight.” Hence the plans for an “energy wall”, integrating solar panels into the building's glass façade. This will be a first in Maastricht for such a large building, *De Limburger* reported last week. According to the newspaper, members of the city's Aesthetics and Heritage Committee were “delighted” with the



Solar panels will be incorporated into the façade of Duboisdomein 30 Photo: Observant

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## Lead candidate: “It hurts that I won't be able to see the project through” Student voted onto municipal council with preference votes

*In a result she describes as “highly unexpected”, second-year Law student Aurele Boesten is set to take a seat on Maastricht's municipal council for the local party M:OED. Although she was placed second, Boesten received more preference votes than the first candidate on the list, Health Sciences student Bram van den Berkmortel, in last week's local elections.*

The pair had deliberately campaigned as joint lead candidates and were together presented as the public face of the party, so this outcome was always possible. Van den Berkmortel says it was “a strange time: we knew from Wednesday that we'd won one seat, so for two days we were suddenly competitors”.

When the preference votes were announced on Friday, revealing that Boesten had received 139 more votes than Van den Berkmortel, the result still came as a shock to both. After discussing the matter together, Boesten decided to accept the seat. It won't be an easy job, she says: “It's a big responsibility. Luckily, I can largely plan

both council work and my studies myself, so I think I can manage both.”

The result was a blow for Van den Berkmortel, especially as he had been instrumental in launching the “project”. In November 2025, M:OED approached him while looking for a new lead candidate after sitting councillor Martin van Rooij decided to step back. “I had already been thinking about how to get more students on the council.” As M:OED has always positioned itself as a student party, working together seemed “the obvious choice”.

Van den Berkmortel put together a team of new members, including Boesten, and they became joint lead candidates. From December, he also gained experience as a “citizen councillor”. “It hurts that I won't be able to see the project through. I hope that feeling will gradually give way to pride – after all, we got nearly fifty per cent more votes than four years ago.” He will support Boesten in the upcoming months, but hasn't yet decided if he will stay active in the party after summer. “It's all still very raw. And I'm graduating this year, so all options are

open. I don't have to stay in Maastricht.” Meanwhile, Boesten is preparing for her role as M:OED's sole representative on the council. “I'll have to seek cooperation with other parties, or I won't get anything done.” Among her priorities are easing regulations on new student housing and extending the opening hours of the bicycle depot, where improperly parked bikes are taken. “That alone would make a huge difference, although ideally I'd like to see the €50 fine reduced too.”

Boesten will be the only student on Maastricht's municipal council. The only other council member with ties to Maastricht University is Jules Ortjens (Volt), who teaches European integration and political history at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Re-elected councillor Stephanie Blom (SP) worked as a lecturer at University College Maastricht until recently, but started a new job on 1 March.

Cleo Freriks



## The Good, The Bald and The Ugly

“

I've been spending more time thinking about my hair recently. Specifically, checking to see if my hairline is receding. Maybe I'm thinking about it more because I'm getting married at the end of the year and I'm already stressing about the photos in which my stunning wife is hidden by the huge glare reflecting off my forehead. But really, I know it's because of hair transplant content on social media.

Interest in male hair transplants have risen by 240 percent over the past fifteen years, and with increasing interest comes increasing advertising. It feels like daily I'm seeing videos of influencers hopping on a €5000 flight with ‘Turkish Hairlines’. It's already difficult not to compare the way you look with others online, but this is made almost impossible when those others are all surgically improved. Which made me think... “is this a taste of what it's like to be a woman?”

Women have forever been bombarded by magazines and digital content showing them surgically altered body standards that are only available to those with a large bank account and a high pain tolerance. On the other hand, body enhancement for men has primarily consisted of regular weightlifting regimes (and perhaps the occasional steroid) – no knives required. And while gym content has existed my whole life, I was always able to maintain the delusion that I can start going to the gym whenever I like to reverse the damage of a decade of drinking heavily on a Friday and remaining horizontal the entire following Saturday. But surgical procedures are different, the choice seems to be: pay or be unsatisfied.

Perhaps the rise in hair transplants for men, does represent a kind of gender equality... the evil capitalist kind. The choice is now whether we let our feelings of body insecurity drive us to regular meet ups with the plastic surgeon, or whether we take a cue from my hairline and make those feelings recede.

”

Tom Smejka,  
lecturer at the faculty  
of Psychology and Neuroscience  
(recently left UM)

## series sing, fight, cry, pray, laugh, work and admire

Stella Thomassen  
(Kanne, Belgium, 1967)

\ Research assistant in  
biochemistry at the Faculty  
of Health, Medicine and  
Life Sciences

\ Relationship status:  
single; one son (Liam, 27)

\ Lives in:  
Maastricht



Photo: Joey Roberts

“  
My father liked beer  
– that’s how I got my name.  
At least, that’s the story  
”

**UM for life.** I’ve been here a long time, since I was twenty. When I was studying biochemistry in Turnhout, Belgium, I needed to find an internship. My parents were sure I’d go to Antwerp, and they’d have to drive me there and back every day. So my mother went to the hospital in Maastricht, explaining that her daughter was looking for an internship. She was referred to the university next door. A secretary there rang the biochemistry department and told one of the doctors that there was a woman at the front desk, putting in a good word for her daughter. My mother had even brought our little dog, Pinky. That broke the ice. I was invited to apply, completed my studies and worked briefly at a hospital in Bilzen, Belgium. But I soon returned to Maastricht and never left again.

**What book is on your bedside table?** I’m not much of a reader, but I really enjoyed *The Seven Sisters* series by Lucinda Riley – beautifully written. I also love Dan Brown’s hefty novels, but I mostly like to read personal development books. One I’d recommend is *Volwassen worden voor volwassenen* (“*Growing Up for Grown-Ups*”), which helps you understand your reactions in certain situations. My mother lives alone in Kanne; my father passed away during the pandemic. As I’m single, I often feel it’s up to me to go see her if she needs anything. I’m happy to do that, especially at weekends, but if I don’t go, I feel guilty. This book teaches you that it’s okay to put yourself first sometimes.

**The Nijmegen Four Day Marches or the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela?** Santiago. Two years ago, I walked the Camino from Porto: 240 kilometres in thirteen days. Five years ago, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I started walking a lot to clear my head, and I always said that I’d make the pilgrimage if I survived. It was tough, with a lot of rain along the way, but once you start, you don’t want to stop. I walked alone; if I felt like talking to another pilgrim, I did, but if I didn’t have the energy, I just said hello and carried on. The start was rather stressful. I had installed three apps for the route, but when I arrived in Porto, the internet on my phone wasn’t working. I was on the verge of breaking down. I’d attached a scallop shell, the pilgrimage symbol, to my bag. I immediately took it off, thinking it was all over. Luckily, I more or less knew where the starting point was, so I went there. When I arrived, my signal came back. I couldn’t have managed without it – you need to be able to book accommodation and look things up.

**What were you like as a child?** Rebellious, but serious too. I come from a family of four children – two boys and two girls. My father was Dutch, my mother Belgian. They met in Kanne, a village with more pubs than people. [laughs] I had a boyfriend quite young and went out a lot, together with my youngest brother. I’m the only one in the family who went on to higher education, which was very important to my mother. She was a housewife, my father worked at ENCI, and

we didn’t have a lot of money. Despite my somewhat rebellious streak, I worked hard at school. I knew repeating a year wasn’t an option – we simply couldn’t afford it. “Work hard, play hard” is my motto.

**I would do anything for my son.** I raised him alone from when he was a baby, often putting myself second. He always came first. Having him was the best decision I ever made. I’ve always encouraged him to follow his heart, travel a lot and keep an open mind. Give everything a chance and don’t judge too quickly – there are two sides to every story. Travelling helps you see that. Everyone should travel; it broadens your horizons.

**I was named after...** My full name is Maria Christella Louisa Guillemine Désirée. My father liked beer. The brands Cristal Alken and Stella Artois supposedly inspired my second name. [laughs] At least, that’s one version of the story. Another is that my parents didn’t want to name me after my grandmother Christine, my mother’s mother, because I was already Maria, after my mother. In Kanne, they call me Noella, as I was born on 23 December. But I started using Stella quite young. I like beer, too.

**Film or series?** I haven’t watched TV since the 2021 floods in Heugem, the neighbourhood where I live. My house is right by the Meuse River, and the water came within five centimetres of my front door. All my belongings had to be moved upstairs, including the TV, which is still there. It was quite frightening; I was evacuated and went to stay with my mother in Kanne. She lives by the canal and was supposed to leave too, but we stayed. I was up all night, but I was able to return home the next day.

**Cancer changed me.** I’m grateful to have survived. Every day feels like a gift. I’ve become much more aware of how fragile life is – it can all be over in an instant. Last year, I walked from Assisi to Rome. It was summer and incredibly hot. On Facebook, someone wrote that only “the bravest of the brave” can complete that route through the Apennines. I’m proud to count myself among them.

Deborah Blekkenhorst

Weekly personal interview with a student or employee

Researchers at Maastricht working on 'smart shoes' that prevent injury

# "I can imagine athletes wearing these insoles"

A 'smart' insole in your shoe that gives tips to help you prevent or recover from injuries. That might just be the future, says movement scientist and runner Bas Van Hooren, who is working on that very thing in his Maastricht lab.

"Are you ready? Then let's do the exercise again." A sweaty badminton player, covered in dozens of sensors, starts her next set of short sprints involving a 180-degree turn. Followed swiftly by a series of dozens of little jumps. Cameras on the ceiling capture every movement, sensor plates in the floor measure the force of her movements. To the side, a small cluster of PhD researchers and students watches all the data stream in on large screens and tablets.

Bas Van Hooren watches on beaming. This is one of the thirty team athletes – including football, volleyball and basketball players – he and his team have welcomed to this 'sports hall' filled with technology at Universiteitssingel 50 over the last few months. There is a similar room a few doors down with a treadmill, visited by dozens of runners, "from beginners to Olympians".

The aim is further development of 'smart' insoles. "They can be inserted into your shoes or trainers and contain sensors that measure the pressure, acceleration and position of the foot for each step," says Van Hooren. A company from Eindhoven introduced the product years ago, but it wasn't a great success. Not that strange, says the researcher, as by itself, the measure-

ments taken by the insole don't tell the average person much. They need easy-to-implement advice, such as 'take smaller steps, because you are putting too much pressure on your knees at the moment'.

## Mechanical stress

Van Hooren knows there is a demand for that, as a runner himself – not a bad one either, he has medalled at a number of national championships, including gold on the 3000 m indoors in 2017, and came eleventh in the European championship half marathon last year. "When you run, you stress your body in two ways," he explains. Firstly, by using energy. "That is fairly easy to estimate yourself, by paying attention to your heartbeat and breathing. That is what 'smart' sports watches and apps try to measure, too." But you also stress your body mechanically: the constant force and impacts your muscles, tendons and bones have to absorb. "You don't really notice that until it's too late. I know all about that, I've had just about every 'popular' injury. It would be of tremendous help if you could monitor that mechanical stress."

And so, in 2019, when he started as a PhD researcher in Maas-

tricht, he decided to "further develop" the product launched in Eindhoven. His main question was: using the 'simple' measurements taken by the insoles, can you determine the extent to which, for example, the hamstring, Achilles tendon or knee are stressed during, say, a run or a game of football? That's where the athletes in the lab come in: they're wearing the smart insoles while they're doing the exercises. "Those insole measurements can then be linked to the extensive data we collect using the sensors and cameras. That way, we can try to find connections and develop models which use the data from the insole to estimate what is going on in the body." So that eventually, athletes wouldn't need complex machines to gain those insights, just the insole.

With his PhD research, Van Hooren proved that the idea had merit. He sent out over two hundred amateur runners, armed with the insole and an app with one of the early versions of his models. "Half the group received instructions from the app to change their movement in the case of overexertion during the run, the other half didn't. After six months, during which time the runners went on at least two runs a week, the first group had sustained half as many injuries."

He wants to use the measurements taken over the last few months to improve his models. "So we are now also looking at athletes in team sports, who move very differently, including jumps and quick changes of direction." Furthermore, he hopes to prevent not just sports injuries in the future, but also explore the use of the insole when rehabilitating from those injuries, or even other conditions. "It can be used to help prevent overexertion, but also under-exertion, as it were, because people are too cautious. That is a factor in cases of arthritis, for example."

## Learning opportunity

Another question is: is it possible to tailor the insole to a particular person? "We estimate the force exerted on the muscles, tendons and bones. But how exactly these forces are absorbed depends on factors that differ from person to person, for example, how stiff the tendons are and what the diameter of the bones is. In an ideal case, you would take that into account to improve the advice given. We're currently looking at whether that is possible without measurements from expensive machines. Because otherwise it may be of interest to top-level athletes, who have access to those sorts of facilities, but it would be useless to the average person."

Van Hooren hopes to have improved models within the next six months, which could be "implemented in an app" in a year. Is this not just helping the commercial party that developed the insoles? "I understand how you could interpret it that way, but from a scientific point of view, this is a huge learning opportunity. And if it works, other companies could use the models too. That way the results don't just end up in a drawer somewhere, they would make their way into the real world."

When might we expect to see these insoles in shops? "I hope soon, but that depends on the companies. They're also the ones who will choose whether to market this to amateurs or professional athletes. Real-time instructions about your movements would be of particular interest to the former; professionals have often already perfected their technique. They would get more out of advice about training programmes. For example, 'You are in danger of causing injury through overexertion, consider skipping that intensive exercise or match.' That's what we are working on at the moment. We've noticed that a lot of sports teams are interested. It's valuable, if it means you can minimise the chances of your 'Messi' tearing their ACL. I could imagine that as a possible future: every professional footballer wearing one of these insoles. Although I do hope that amateur athletes and patients will also benefit from it, as that's a much larger group."

Dennis Vaendel



A runner in the Maastricht lab. Cameras and sensors record the mechanical stress on his body as he runs on a treadmill  
Photo: Joey Roberts

Van Hooren is still looking for test subjects to exercise in his lab. Runners must be able to run a marathon in under 3:30 (men) or 3:50 (women), or an equivalent time over shorter distances. The criteria are less strict for team sports, as long as "you have some experience and are fairly agile". If you are interested, email: [b.vanhooren@maastrichtuniversity.nl](mailto:b.vanhooren@maastrichtuniversity.nl)



**Therese Grohnert (39)**  
/ associate professor  
at the department of  
Education Development  
and Education Research  
of the School of Business  
and Economics / awarded  
a doctorate in 2017 / from  
Germany / lives with her  
partner in Maastricht /  
commute to UM: three-  
minute walk / grade  
work-life balance: seven

## Maastricht Young Academy and *Observant*

*“A day in the life of... It was Boukje Compen, member of the Maastricht Young Academy (MYA), who approached us last year to ask whether MYA and Observant could work together to show readers what life is like for young academics, “and everything that entails”. Many consistently work overtime, and feel an enormous pressure to perform. In the end, it can be incredibly challenging to keep everything – both at home and at work – running smoothly. Observant suggested interviewing in pairs; after Jenny Schell-Leugers and Gabriel Paiva Fonseca (Observant 15), it is now the turn of Therese Grohnert and Boukje Compen.*

Young researchers  
about their work-life balance

**“You’re thrown  
in at the deep  
end and left to  
figure it out on  
your own”**

Becoming an assistant professor after a doctorate or post-doctorate track is no easy task. “You’re thrown in at the deep end,” say Therese Grohnert and Boukje Compen in this joint interview on workloads, Recognition & Reward, and the requirements set for researchers, both at and beyond Maastricht University. “As a PhD student, I had five meetings a week, now I have ten a day!”

Text: Riki Janssen

Photos: Ellen Oosterhof

“We’ve told them over and over again that they don’t have to produce ten publications per year. Quality is what matters. If you’ve published one great article in addition to teaching, that’s fine. But people are always inclined to do more.” Those are the words of new rector Jan Smits in his farewell interview as dean of the Faculty of Law. They bring a smile to the faces of Boukje Compen, assistant professor at FHML, and Therese Grohnert, associate professor at SBE. They are members of the Maastricht Young Academy, are involved with teacher professionalisation and have interested supervisors who say things like: “Don’t do too much. Take care of yourself.” And, like the new rector: “You don’t have to produce so many publications.”

All very well, say the two, but when push comes to shove, the academic world outside their department doesn’t work quite like that. Compen: “Recently, an independent faculty committee, made up of people who don’t know me, spent some time scrutinising my cv to determine whether I was eligible for a promotion. They asked for documents, and then it turned out that the number of publications and the impact factor [how often an article is cited] were very important. Meanwhile, according to my contract, I spend most of my time on teaching (40 per cent) and docent professionalisation (40 per cent), and can only spend one day a week (20 per cent) on research.” She was promoted to UD1 last summer, the highest level, but was told “the numbers were somewhat disappointing” in terms of publications. The committee also said she was not visible enough in the media.

### Hard facts

A familiar story, says Grohnert. “And not just at UM. When you submit a grant application to the NWO [national research fund], the traditional criteria are still very important. People try and remedy that by a ‘nar-

rative cv', in which you explain all the things you've done, but it takes time for a culture shift to happen. We talk about Recognition & Reward, about academic citizenship, we want researchers not to have to excel at all aspects and we want the many other roles to be acknowledged – supervising PhD candidates, teaching, management tasks, research, etc. But I think those cold hard facts give the assessors a feeling of control. After all, they were raised in that tradition.”

And because of those old criteria, they easily manage to hit the 40 (Compen) and 38 (Grohnert) hours listed in their contracts. The extra time is spent organising conferences, management tasks, Maastricht Young Academy, and a range of other things that they consider part of good academic citizenship. The latter is not an official part of their job profiles, but there is an unspoken expectation that researchers will contribute to it. “Nobody says that you have to, we do it to ourselves, but if you do it, you are rewarded tremendously: in promotion opportunities and research funding,” Grohnert says.

## Overtime

What about their work-life balance? Surprisingly, that's not too bad at all. A seven out of ten for Grohnert and an eight for Compen. They both conclude that if they'd been asked that three or four years ago, it would have been a failing grade. It has everything to do with experience, with getting used to a job – assistant and associate professor – which involves keeping many plates spinning and a lot of responsibilities.

The change from PhD student and postdoc to professorship is a big one, experience has shown them. “A PhD or postdoc track, which revolves mostly around research, doesn't prepare you for academic life.” Once you become an assistant professor, the workload – from management tasks to PhD supervision – increases, says Compen, who now officially has one day left over for research (Grohnert has two). “You have no idea what it involves before you start.” Grohnert: “You're thrown in at the deep end and left to figure it out on your own. As a PhD student, I had five meetings a week, now I have ten a day! At the same time, your inbox is flooded with sixty or seventy emails a day.” The relative freedom afforded a PhD student has also disappeared. Compen: “I was broadly able to set my own schedule. Now my diary is often filled well in advance, with all sorts, such as a lecturer professionalisation course that can't be rearranged. That was a real setback, and in conjunction with all those emails about ongoing issues, it gave me a real feeling of urgency.”

## 'I can stay, unless'

What made Grohnert's first years as an assistant professor extra hard was the old rule that a faculty would only decide whether to offer a permanent contract after five years. “That feeling of 'I can stay, unless' was very stressful. Now I have a permanent job and I have a much clearer idea of where I stand in the department, that existential dread has gone.” Despite that, she is careful where she expends her energy – and she has to be, she has been suffering from long covid for four years now. “I was in a wheelchair, but now I can walk for 1.5 to 2 hours again. A huge improvement. I practised maintaining healthy boundaries for myself in hospital. I started by working eight hours a week and seeing which tasks were feasible. I never thought about changing jobs, I love this job and wouldn't want to do anything else. I still work overtime, but it's a lot less than my colleagues, who always supported me. I work from home and online a lot, take breaks, and developed a routine to actually stop working once the day is over.”

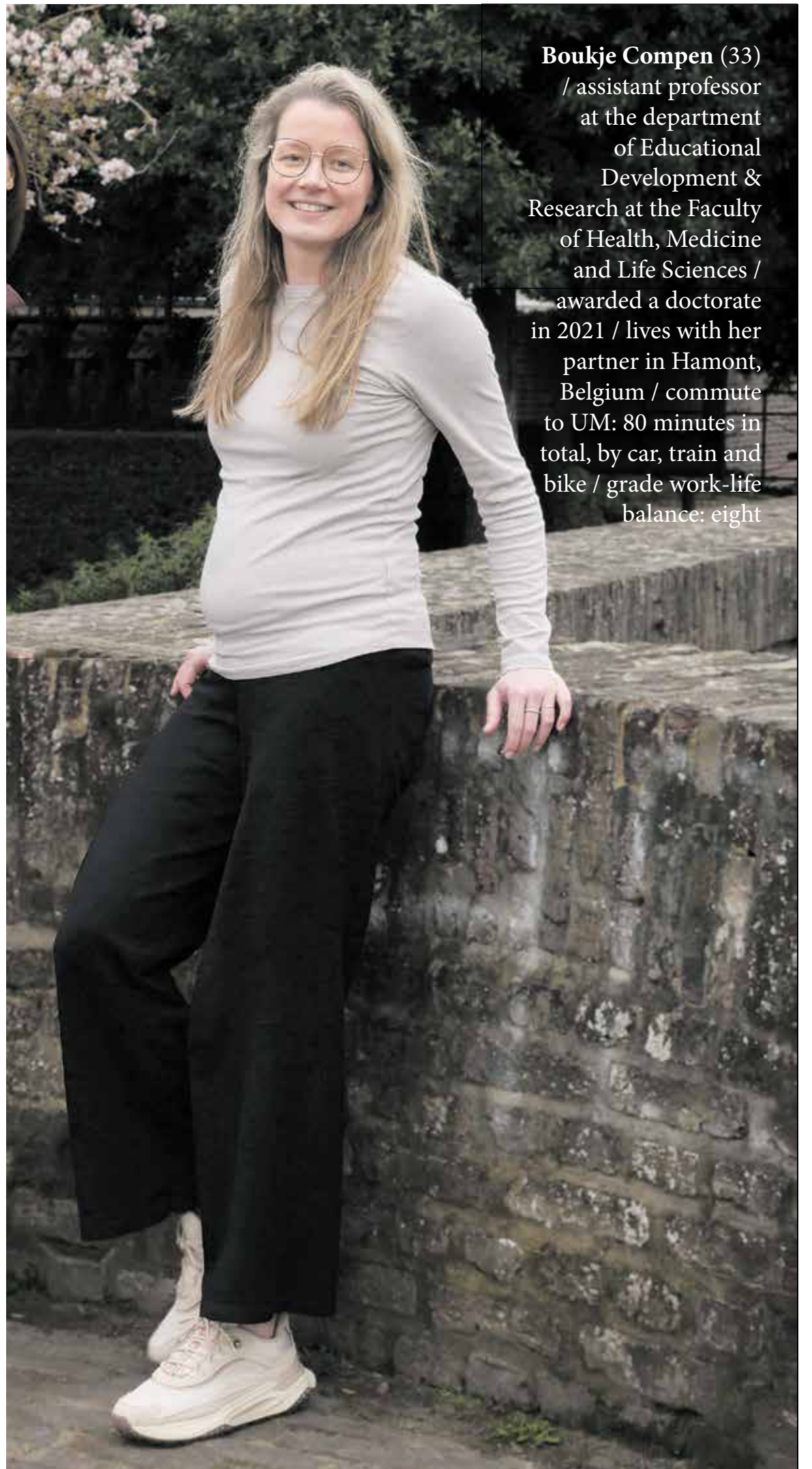
Compen, who – thanks to a change in the regulations – was offered a permanent job after a year, never takes breaks. She starts working the moment she gets on the train from Weert to Maastricht. She has recently started an exercise programme 'strength training to music', “as a distraction, I had trouble letting work go, I spent a lot of time on it outside office hours. That's much better now.” Her pregnancy probably contributes to that greatly, as does her boyfriend regularly asking her when she wants to get back to work, ‘Do you have to do that now? Or would tomorrow be soon enough?’

## A good example

When she travelled to a conference as a PhD student at Antwerp and Leuven, her colleagues would take out their laptops during every change and start working, says Compen. “I wouldn't do that now, I don't think that sets a good example.” Grohnert: “The benefit of experiencing the move to Recognition & Reward is that we know which system is better. We are setting a different example for our PhD students. If I notice someone isn't feeling well, I send them home. I don't like the culture of just carrying on even if you have a fever, or if your child has been at home sick for a few days. I don't send emails at the weekend or in the evening either. If I sometimes work at the weekend, then that's my choice. Nobody has to follow my example.”

## Tip for the new rector

What is their tip for the new rector to really improve the work-life balance? “We have to consider collectively how best to expend our energy. Does everything have to be a meeting?” Grohnert wonders. “It's nice that you want to involve everyone in everything, very democratic and



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/ assistant professor  
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of Educational  
Development &  
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in 2021 / lives with her  
partner in Hamont,  
Belgium / commute  
to UM: 80 minutes in  
total, by car, train and  
bike / grade work-life  
balance: eight

also very important, but maybe not always necessary. Sometimes I'm in a meeting with 25 people and there are only two items on the agenda. You can still easily fill an hour and a half. Sometimes you have to be able to say: you sort it out, I trust you. I would champion a maximum number of hours spent in meetings per week. The remainder is for rest and time to think.”

Compen nods in agreement. “We should also make much better use of our staff's strengths. Not everybody can be good at everything. The idea of R&R, that you can focus on particular tasks, has not yet landed. We still expect everyone to do everything. But not everybody is a good leader or a master teacher. There is a lot that can still be gained there.”

news

# Due for replacement

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plans. The energy wall will be the same colour as the current façade, giving the weathered exterior an “aesthetic refresh without altering its appearance”, says Maessen.

A further advantage is that the building’s existing “shell” – “the dark panels with insulation behind them surrounding the concrete

structure” – was due for replacement anyway, Maessen notes. “A lot of heat escapes through it. The new setup could save around 85,000 cubic metres of natural gas a year. That’s already more than half of UM’s target to reduce its total gas consumption by 135,000 cubic metres by 2035.” Research shows that together with other measures, such as a more energy-efficient heating and cooling system,

glass with better insulation and a reversible heat pump, the building could eventually be completely gas-free, says Maessen. “This aligns with the municipality’s ambition to fully phase out natural gas by 2050.” He expects the tender process to be launched next month, with construction likely to begin at the end of this year or early next year.

Over the next fifteen to twenty years, other

university buildings will also be upgraded. “Energy walls certainly won’t be possible everywhere, but better insulation and more efficient systems are. We still need to work out the exact schedule, though – it’s incredibly expensive, and the logistics need careful planning.”

Dennis Vaendel

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